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Original Article

JAAS

Journal of Asian and African Studies
2021, Vol. 56(5) 1051–1063
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DOI: 10.1177/00219096211007658
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The Origins of the EPRDF and the Prospects for the Prosperity Party

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Abstract

This paper presents the historical development of the authoritarian Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) with particular attention to its origins in civil war and its use of multi-national federal structures to balance centralizing dynamics and demands for regional autonomy. It argues that the reform process launched by Prime Minister Abiy and the formation of the successor Prosperity Party failed to overcome the challenges and political logics that undermined the EPRDF. The article concludes by examining the prospects of the center to manage these contradictions and bind together the distinct and highly polarized regions and political interests.

Keywords

Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, Prosperity Party, multi-national federalism, authoritarianism

Introduction

With its origins as a victorious insurgent group in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) consolidated power as an authoritarian party that dominated Africa's second most populous country. It did so by managing two contradictory logics—one that built upon the hierarchy and cohesion of the rebel movement that won the war and the second that drew upon the diversity of Ethiopia's peoples and emphasized ethnically defined parties and states. The EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnically defined parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM, later renamed the Amhara Democratic Party), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO, later renamed the Oromo Democratic Party), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), which was itself a multi-ethnic coalition party. These parties were quite diverse but were coordinated by the coalition's powerful Executive Committee and, initially, relatively weak ethnically defined regional states. In 2016, however, after 25 years of rule, the EPRDF faced an acute crisis. Sustained and largely spontaneous demonstrations put significant areas of the country beyond the

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control of the regime and tensions within the EPRDF spilled into the open. In 2018, a new prime minister from the historically marginalized Oromo wing of the coalition launched a reform process that both reflected the historical logics of the EPRDF and also sought to overcome them. This article argues that dynamics within the ruling party drive the transition within Ethiopia.

In November 2019, the EPRDF ceased to exist and a successor party—the Prosperity Party (PP)—was established. The TPLF refused to join the PP but the other EPRDF constituent party leaders and members did, along with groups such as the Somali that had previously been outside of the ruling coalition. The PP is now the incumbent, but the extent to which it retains the ability to mobilize the extensive human and financial resources of the old EPRDF remains unclear. In early 2020, the PP's "regional chapters" are largely the same Oromo, Amhara, and southern party structures that made up the prior coalition. In many—but not all—villages the same cadres in power remained in power. Some observers asked whether the powerful party-state of the past with its considerable access to patronage and coercive power was merely rebranded rather than dismantled (Gardener, 2020; see also Zerihun, 2020). Continuity of dominant party politics rather than a new democratic beginning characterized the early months of the PP in power.

This paper will present the historical development of the EPRDF with particular attention to its origins in civil war and its use of ethno-federal structures to balance centralizing dynamics and demands for regional autonomy. It will then analyze how the post-2018 leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sought to institutionalize reform and manage violent outbursts in multiple parts of the country. In the final section, very preliminary thoughts regarding the implications of the EPRDF transforming into the PP will be outlined. The core logics that explain the longevity of the EPRDF's rule are likely to remain powerful and Ethiopian politics will likely remain dominated by political actors who mobilize on the basis of ethnicity and that must operate in the contradiction between centralized unity on the one hand and ethnic and regional diversity on the other. However, the ability of the center to manage these contradictions and bind together the distinct and highly polarized regions and political interests will be significant challenges.[1]

The importance of winning

The EPRDF is shaped in large measure by the legacies of the protracted armed struggle that ended in 1991 in victory. Civil wars that end in rebel victory follow distinct war-to-peace transitions (Lyons, 2016a, 2016b). The transitional process in Ethiopia emphasized power consolidation rather than power sharing and focused on transforming the armed insurgent group into a dominant authoritarian political party (Aalen, 2020). The legacies of war that shaped the rebel-to-party transition included high levels of solidarity and leadership coherence forged during the protracted armed struggle, the precedents and organizational structures developed by the rebels to administer liberated territory, and the legitimacy derived from winning the war.

The victorious TPLF had its roots in the clandestine politics and fierce and sometimes deadly debates within the Ethiopian Student Movement of the early 1970s (Young, 1997). It remained a relatively small force until late in the war and operated in a fairly confined area. The movement was not cohesive at birth but became so over time as the pressures of the struggle compelled tight, hierarchical organization. In 1985, a vanguard within the party—the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray—consolidated its hold and purged dissidents (Aregawi, 2009). By the time the war ended in 1991, many top leaders had fought together in extremely difficult conditions for 15 years.

In part as a result of this historical process, the TPLF was a battle-hardened, highly disciplined organization with strict rules of conduct and that deployed political cadres with its military units to promote its political message (Mulugeta, 2020). Decision-making within top leadership circles often involved lengthy debates and there was an institutionalized system of self-criticism and party

discipline known as *gimgema* (Medhane and Young, 2003). Members outside of the central committee, however, were not encouraged to challenge policies but rather to implement orders from above. The TPLF's commitments to vanguard leadership and democratic centralism generated discipline within the party (Tefera, 2019).

In general, victorious insurgents are likely to have experience in administering liberated territory and, as a consequence, develop trained, effective, and disciplined cadres with the capacity to govern civilians. In Ethiopia, this rebel governance often created nondemocratic norms and precedents that shaped how the party subsequently operated during peacetime (Mampilly, 2011). Wartime administration emphasized discipline and building connections so that the civilian population could better support the rebel's military strategy. Civilians were not constituents to whom the military leadership had to answer but rather auxiliaries to be indoctrinated and mobilized to advance the goals of the rebellion. The period of armed struggle therefore created deep linkages between the rebel movement and the people of Tigray (Tronvoll, 2009).

Alongside the wartime legacies of organizational coherence and models of military administration, the imperatives of war-to-peace transitions following rebel victory help explain the Ethiopian transition and post-war politics. Victorious rebels derive significant legitimacy from the costs endured in defeating the old order and ending the violence—"We rule because we sacrificed!" Rebel fighters with their characteristic short pants and bushy hair on the streets of Addis Ababa provided ample evidence of the effective transfer of power. As the victor, the rebel movement managed the transition from above and used elections, military demobilization, and the process of drafting a new constitution to consolidate its power. A strong, centralized, and hierarchical party that was built upon models and precedents of the victorious rebel group therefore explains part of the puzzle of Ethiopian politics (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

The imperatives of war-to-peace transition

While the TPLF emerged as a powerful party building upon its wartime legacies, it faced the challenges of transforming itself from a rebel movement with its base in the far northern region of Tigray into a political party that could govern Ethiopia's diverse populations. It did so by creating ethnically defined affiliates and forming the EPRDF (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). The ANDM, OPDO, and SEPDM joined the TPLF in the coalition, each responsible for governing its respective ethnically defined regional state in a form of ethno-federalism (Aalen, 2011; Asnake, 2013). The insurgent national liberation organizational model developed in Tigray was replicated in other regions regardless of whether the population had a similar historical sense of identity or experience of wartime solidarity.

While legacies from the protracted war in Tigray shaped the TPLF, the other constituent parties in the EPRDF coalition had very different origins and relationships with the armed struggle. The ANDM developed in part out of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party but many within its notional Amhara ethnic constituency identified as "Ethiopian." The original leadership of the OPDO consisted of prisoners of war and the party had to confront many Oromo who identified with a long-established, rival national liberation movement, the Oromo Liberation Front. The SEPDM, which was itself a coalition of dozens of small parties, was not created until after the war and therefore lacked the wartime legacies that characterized the TPLF and, to an extent, the ANDM (Vaughan, 2011).

The EPRDF, as a post-conflict authoritarian party, was thus built upon a set of coalition partners that drew on very different political legacies from the period of armed struggle. Although the TPLF achieved a significant degree of solidarity and discipline through its rebel experience, the other regional parties came to power without experiencing the same wartime processes. The coherence

and discipline associated with a party that had its origins in victory after a prolonged armed struggle were strongest in the north (TPLF) and weakest in the south (OPDO, SEPDM) (Arriola et al., in press). The EPRDF was a coalition of very different member parties.

Politics within the EPRDF

The EPRDF ruled as a powerful authoritarian party that had extensive coercive capacities, controlled major party-owned endowment funds, and led mass organizations for youth and women. It came to have seven million members and penetrated even very remote villages. Political opposition, particularly after the 2005 electoral crisis, was shattered or driven into exile and the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation decimated human rights advocacy organizations. The regime harassed and arrested opposition political leaders and independent journalists. The EPRDF and its affiliates won 100% of the parliamentary seats in the 2015 elections (Arriola and Lyons, 2016). While electoral processes were non-competitive, the domination of the ruling party obscured the high levels of contention, deeply rooted cleavages, and personal rivalries that indicated internal churning. The EPRDF was governed by a Council and an Executive Committee. Each member party selects nine members to the Executive Committee and 45 to the Council, despite the fact that the OPDO represents six times as many constituents as the TPLF.

For example, controversy emerged during the 2013 OPDO party congress between factions affiliated with Junedin Sado and Abadula Gemeda, each of whom had previously served as president of Oromia Regional State. Abadula supporters accused the Junedin camp of being "errand boys serving political interests outside of the OPDO," while Junedin's supporters charged Abadula with "rent-seeking behavior and corruption" (Addis Fortune (2013); interviews, Washington DC, 2017). Contention between parties in the alliance also increased as the historically weaker members of the coalition developed their own leaderships and political networks. The head of the ANDM Central Committee office emphasized in 2015 that the ANDM "gave sanctuaries to TPLF fighters who were strategically backpedaling" as the military Derg regime launched a major offensive (Daniel, 2015). TPLF veterans bristled at claims that they had ever "backpedaled." While the official history of the EPRDF emphasized the role of the TPLF during the struggle, by the mid-2010s the other member parties increasingly began to highlight their independent histories and contributions to the struggle before joining the EPRDF.[2]

Ethiopia was a highly centralized state, but under the ethno-federal system, regional states had meaningful degrees of authority. The Amhara National Regional State, for example, has its own constitution; its own elected council; regional bureaus of transport, health, and education; its own system of courts and prisons; and so forth. Long lines of farmers waited to make their cases in Bahir Dar to Amhara regional court officials to adjudicate land disputes, indicating that authority to decide issues fundamental to everyday life was located in the regional state. In 2011, the Administration and Security Bureau had built a 100,000-member local militia (fieldwork, Bahir Dar, 2011). While dependent on the center for resources, over time the regional states gained increased capacities. Over time, each developed its own patronage networks and increasingly experienced leaders.

The TPLF's ability to remain in the dominant position within this fractious coalition of larger but less coherent constituent parties stemmed in part from the fact that it started out in 1991 with the most experienced leadership. It remained dominant after surviving a split in 2001 but began to become increasingly fragmented following the death of its leader Meles Zenawi in 2012. The TPLF's head start was further enhanced as a result of internal leadership competition within the three other regional parties that initially left these parties without experienced leadership. Data (see

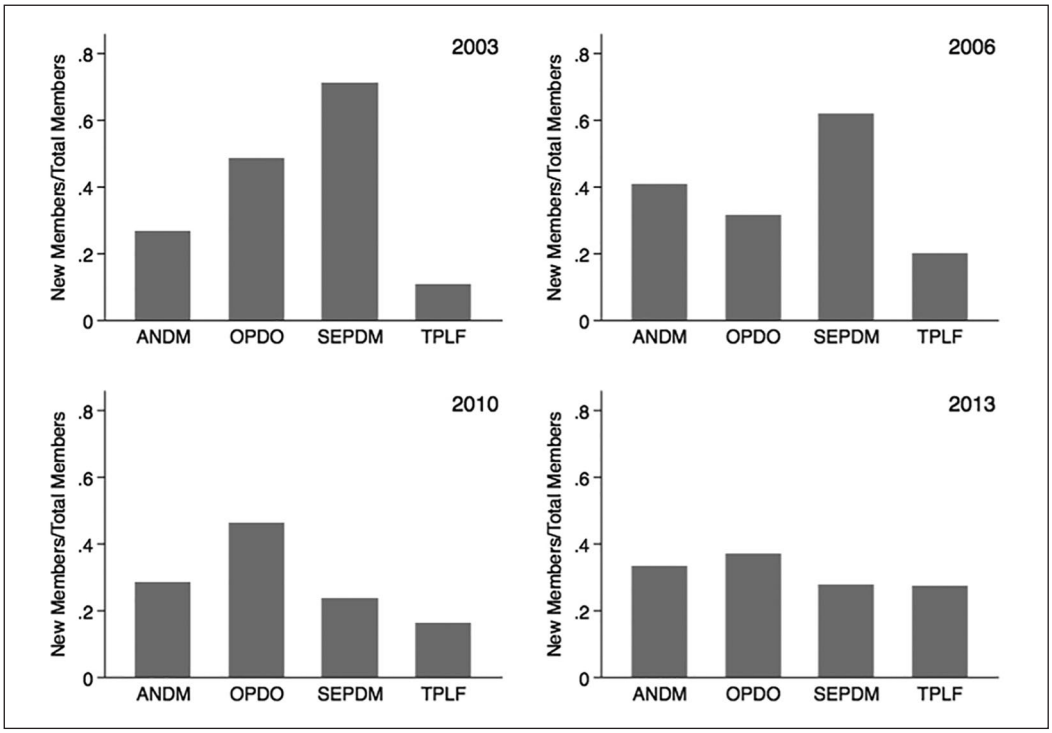

Figure 1. New membership in regional party central committees (2003–2013).

Arriola et al., in press) demonstrate that patterns of appointments to the central committees of the four parties differ significantly but converged over time (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 shows the number of new members elected at each party congress as a proportion of total central committee members. Higher bars indicate that a larger proportion of a party's central committee was composed of new members. This view of central committees underscores the extent to which the TPLF's cohesion may have been maintained over time through the limited inclusion of new members. In the five party congresses held between 2003 and 2013, the TPLF added an average of eight new members, representing about 18% of the entire central committee. By contrast, the other parties consistently absorbed far more new members at each party congress. The ANDM had an average of 19 new members (31%), the OPDO had an average of 27 new members (40%), and the SEPDM had an average of 35 new members (45%).

High levels of leadership change within the OPDO and SEPDM initially made it more difficult to cultivate experienced regional leaders who could counterbalance the TPLF's senior veterans. By 2013, however, these rates of replacement converged. All four parties in the coalition began to exhibit leaderships with similar levels of seniority and networks to their respective regional states. As we will see, this convergence contributed to the change in party leadership in 2018.

At the same time as regional states and parties developed new capacities, the center became increasingly vital to the "developmental state" project of jumpstarting economic growth through targeted government investments (Berhanu, 2011). Major projects such as dams in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, massive sugar plantations in South Omo, and industrial parks around Hawassa were designed to advance a national, rather than a series of local, developmental objectives. Key

actors linked to party leaders (such as the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray) invested in banks, insurance companies, and other businesses in Addis Ababa (Vaughan and Mesfin, 2011). The successes of the developmental state heightened the tensions between the two political dynamics of centralization and regional autonomy. On the one hand, politics at the center rose in importance, as investments from the center shaped economic developments across the regions. At the same time, regional political leaders increasingly faced demands from their constituents for jobs and benefits from investments in "their" regions. People in the southern region, for example, demanded priority for jobs in the federally funded industrial parks and sugar processing plants located in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) (Interviews, Addis Ababa, 2011, 2019). In other words, the center and the regional states made conflicting claims for the benefits of development.

Popular protests[3]

In the aftermath of the May 2015 election, in which the EPRDF and its affiliates won 100% of the seats, Ethiopia appeared stable with the opposition vanquished and the ruling party in firm control. By October 2016, however, the Ethiopian government was clearly in its worse crisis since coming to power in 1991. A wave of popular uprisings and violence began in Oromia, spread to the Amhara region, and shook the country. Regional officials in the OPDO and ANDM, the two largest constituent parties in the ruling coalition, seemed incapable or unwilling to end the protests and reassert central authority. On October 9, the Ethiopian government announced a state of emergency.

The underlying sense of injustice that motivated the protests included both political and economic grievances, many of them long-standing and deeply historical. The closing of political space, the shattering of opposition parties, the decimation of civil society, and the arrests of independent media eliminated channels for peaceful dissent. Despite figures suggesting rapid overall growth in the economy from 2005 to 2015, unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—remained high. "We can't eat GDP growth!" said some desperate citizens. Increased urbanization, education, literacy, and mobility created rising expectations. Most dangerously, these economic grievances were linked to a pervasive perception that most of the benefits of economic development had gone to Tigray or to a few corrupt elites collaborating with the TPLF.

In November 2015, protests broke out in Ginchi, a town west of Addis Ababa where the government allegedly planned to clear a forest to make room for a development project (Mahlet and Tsedale, 2015). The protests rapidly spread across Oromia, often erupting in relatively small towns (Day, 2015). Although connected by a common narrative about historical marginalization, the protests also focused on specific complaints regarding working conditions and control of land in particular. Demonstrators were often very young, including high school and even middle school students, and mobilized without an overarching organization or leadership. On August 6, 2016, protesters demonstrated in some 200 towns across the Oromia region (Allo, 2016). The geographic spread and extensiveness of the protests in the 12 months leading up to the state of emergency extended across Oromia (see Figure 2). The protests were driven by localized economic grievances but were connected across Oromia and in the diaspora by a shared narrative of historical marginalization and perceptions that corruption benefited TPLF leaders at the expense of the Oromo.

Local OPDO authorities at first appeared helpless and disoriented, either unable or unwilling to restore order. Although some in the EPRDF leadership condemned the demonstrations, others in the OPDO began to speak sympathetically of them, making cleavages within the coalition public.

The demonstrations thereby created a crisis within the OPDO and thus within the larger EPRDF coalition (Kalkidan and Tesfalem, 2016). The OPDO had long struggled to overcome its origins as

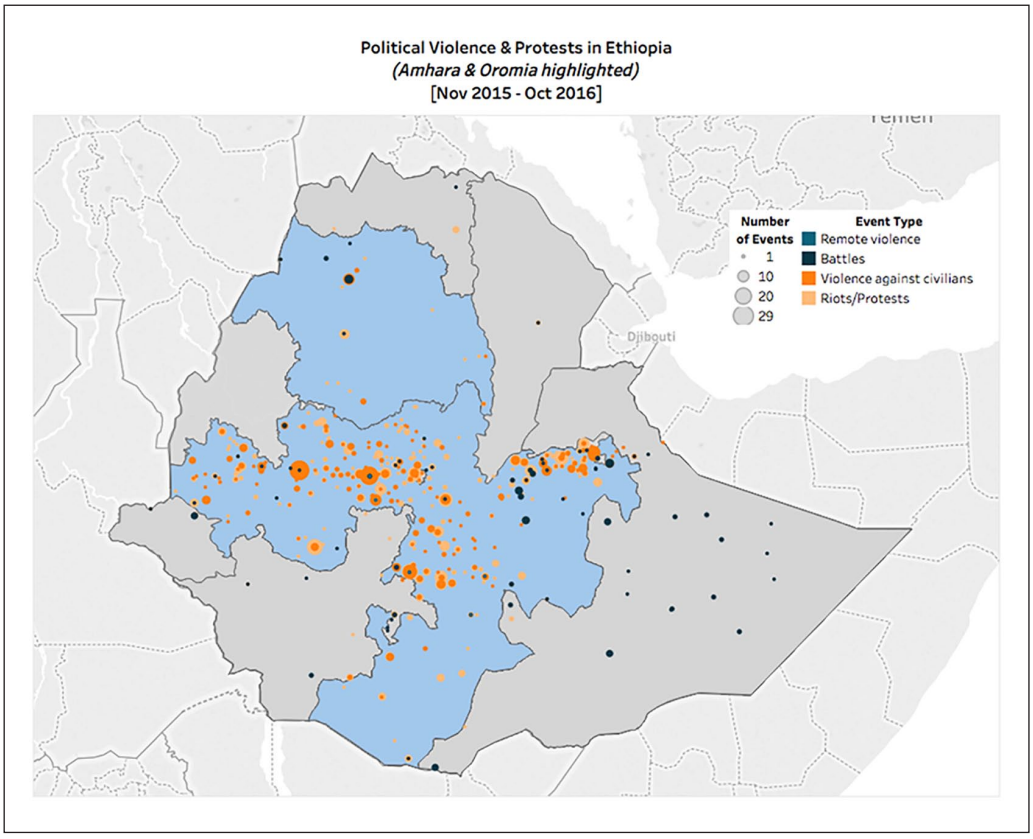

Figure 2. Geographic spread of protests in Ethiopia (November 2015–October 2016).[4]

an instrument of the TPLF and to become recognized as the authentic defender of Oromo nationalism and interests. The 2016 protests provided that opportunity. Lemma Mergesa, then president of Oromia, vowed to "address the legitimate concerns of the youth." Lemma distanced himself from the EPRDF and said, "I took the oath of office to serve my people, not shadowy elements hiding behind the cover of strict adherence to party dogma" (Opride, 2017). Supported by the young Oromo street protesters as well as powerful diaspora media voices such as Jawar Mohamed's Oromo Media Network, this leadership became an alternative to the "old" EPRDF and one of the last opportunities to prevent the collapse of the ruling coalition.

During the early summer of 2016, the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) seemed relaxed compared with Oromia (field notes, Bahir Dar, June 2016). By July, however, a specific controversy over whether the Welkait zone should be part of Tigray or ANRS sparked a protest. Violence erupted when security forces sought to arrest the leaders of the Welkait Amhara Identity Committee, and major demonstrations followed in Gondar and Bahir Dar. Members of the ANDM joined the demonstrators in support of this symbolic cause for many Amharas. Political leaders emphasized their differences with the TPLF as a means to accelerate Amhara identity construction (Lefort, 2016). With the OPDO and ANDM pursing agendas linked to local anger and protests, the EPRDF increasingly fell into crisis.

Shock therapy and *Medemer*

As discussed above, due in part to patterns of leadership convergence 25 years after the end of the armed struggle, the EPRDF increasingly operated as a coalition of four different member parties, each with specific identities, interests, and leadership claims. The promises of ethno-federalism were never fully met but did result in new regional institutions and capacities within the regional parties. The long-dominant TPLF faced its own internal factionalization, making it preoccupied and less able to dominate the coalition (Berhane, 2018). The massive protests in 2016 both reflected and accelerated a crisis of legitimacy for the EPRDF. At the same time, however, the confrontations on the streets allowed elements within the two largest coalition members—the OPDO and ANDM—to construct new claims of legitimacy and challenge the old distribution of power within the coalition. The populist positions allowed long-time party stalwarts to champion a critique of the ruling party and the TPLF in particular, despite their established positions within the Executive Committee and their control of the two largest regional parties and states.

In March 2018, after a period of contentious and indecisive meetings and initial efforts at Deep Renewal, the EPRDF's Executive Council selected OPDO leader Abiy Ahmed as the new prime minister. The ANDM joined the OPDO in backing Abiy's candidacy, but the TPLF—long the coalition's dominant member—reportedly did not (Fisher and Meressa, 2018). Rather than moving incrementally, Abiy and his cohort of young reformers advanced rapidly on a range of fronts in a kind of shock therapy that did not allow time for the old guard to mobilize. The new government invited long-exiled opposition figures to return—including groups such as Ginbot 7, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which had previously been labelled "terrorists"—and released political prisoners (Woldemariam, 2018). Abiy proclaimed that privatization would accelerate and include key national assets such as Ethio Telecom and symbolic enterprises such as Ethiopia Airlines. Finally, Abiy promised to honor the Algiers peace agreement with Eritrea, flew to Asmara to meet with President Isaias Afewerki, and opened border crossings. Ethiopians (and international observers) were stunned by the suddenness and expansiveness with which these changes occurred. The new leadership demonstrated that it had sufficient support to move against powerful elements of the old regime. In the context of the upsurge of violence along the border with Oromia and in Jigjiga, Addis Ababa removed the brutal, long-time Somali National Regional State president Abdi "Iley" Mohamoud Omar. METEC, the military-owned industrial enterprise, faced heightened scrutiny and top leaders were arrested (Mahlet and Yared, 2018).

The scale and speed of political reform advanced by Abiy was impressive. However, the process of moving from reforms that were possible by proclamation or action from above to the institutionalization of a more sustainable liberal order was slow and tentative. In a number of places regional state security forces broke down and, along with non-state actors, engaged in land grabs and attacks on minority communities. Violence was particularly high between the Gedeo and Guji zones, along the Somali–Oromo and Benishangul-Gumuz–Oromo regional state borders, and later in Welega (western Oromia). As a result, significant insecurity escalated in many parts of the countryside, resulting in nearly three million internally displaced persons in 2019 (Gardner, 2019).

The EPRDF regime's control over the countryside unraveled across a number of regions. The 2018 political opening provided space for heightened grievances and nationalist claims accentuated by political and institutional incentives that encouraged ethnic outbidding. With the notable exception of the TPLF, each of the parties within the ruling coalition faced significant opposition movements in 2019, often mobilized around polarizing narratives of identity and injustice that identified the state, ruling party, or other ethnic groups as the source of hardships. Without a strong

central state to manage relations between regional states and zones, security dilemmas led to escalation of local rivalries into violence (Semir, 2019).

Abiy's party in his home region of Oromia faced multiple threats, from the recently returned OLF rebel movement, from the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) led by recently released political prisoners, by the Oromo Liberation Army engaged in an armed struggle in Welega, and by media figure Jawar Mohamed and his followers among Oromo youth known collectively as Qeerroo. Many Oromos initially responded to Abiy's rise to power with jubilation but quickly suspected that his ideas of *medemer* and emphasis on unity and ethnic harmony that emphasized unity did not favor the aspirations for self-rule favored by many historically marginalized groups (Nagessa, 2020). When Abiy refurbished and opened Emperor Menelik's 19th-century palace in Addis Ababa to visitors as part of the newly created "Unity Park," many young Oromo militants saw the gesture as an insult, since Menelik is regarded as the creator of the imperial Ethiopian state (Interviews, Addis Ababa, Adama, and Bishoftu, January, 2020). The Oromo youth organized loosely in Qeerroo networks demonstrated their ongoing ability to act when they mobilized in defense of Jawar in October 2019 (Marks, 2019).

In the Amhara regional state, the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) attempted to build its nationalist credentials by emphasizing populist narratives such as demands for the return of the Welkayite zone from the Tigray state. Officials in Bahir Dar, however, faced considerable pressure from the newly created National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), which advanced ever more categorical narratives around historical Amhara grievances. The ADP and NAMA each tried to out-flank the other in order to seize the mantle of the most indomitable protector of Amhara interests, often framed in terms of opposition to the TPLF. The ideas and even some of the leadership of NAMA became deeply influential within the ADP (Semir, 2019). NAMA leaders insisted that the Amhara were subject to systemic and disproportionate "unique" marginalization during the EPRDF years and frame their grievances around allegations of "genocide." In June 2019, the head of the Amhara regional state's security forces, General Asaminew Tsige, assassinated Ambachew Mekonnen, the president of the Amhara regional state. Asaminew was seen by many as a relentless supporter of Amhara rights (Salem, 2019). In the aftermath of the assassination, Asaminew was killed and many NAMA leaders were arrested. As NAMA pushed ADP into adopting increasingly hardline positions, intense nationalism was used to justify attacks on minority enclaves in the Amhara region, notably the Qemant and the Oromo special zone around the city of Kemise (Ephream, 2019). In this highly polarized context, scapegoating and fear mobilized ethno-centric support for nationalist parties.

Violence broke out in the SNNPR capital Hawassa in July 2019 as Sidama youth known as *Ejeto* allegedly attacked businesses owned by their ethnic rivals, the Wolayita, resulting in dozens of deaths (BBC, 2019). Many Sidama leaders had been demanding a referendum to leave the SNNPR and create their own regional state. In the aftermath of the attacks in Hawassa, the central authorities agreed to hold the vote and in November 2019 the Sidama people voted overwhelming in favor of the proposal (Tronvoll, 2020). Other zones increased their demands for regional state status following this precedent, creating a potential cascade of new regional states that threatened to dismantle the SNNPR. Each new regional state inherently raises questions of borders and the distribution of assets often concentrated in and around multi-ethnic cities (notably Hawassa).

In Ethiopia, therefore, 2018 and 2019 simultaneously represented a period of dramatic political liberalization and tragic polarization and ethnic violence with uncertain implications for the future. In some places, notably Tigray, strong local officials managed stability. In others, notably the Somali regional state, new leadership generated dramatic and positive outcomes.[5] In general, however, the political transformation propelled the unraveling of security and the once strong links

between the center and some regions. The state became less coherent than in the past and contending ethnic mobilizations escalated their fights against the state as well as against one another.

The end of the EPRDF

Elections had been scheduled for May 2020, following the five-year cycle mandated by the constitution. Obstacles, in part due to continuing violence in several regions, led to a delay until August 2020. In this context, the EPRDF leadership voted to end the 30-year-old coalition and created a new unified party, the Prosperity Party (PP) in November 2019. The Oromo, Amhara, and Southern wings within the coalition disbanded and their respective individual members joined the new political party. In addition to moving beyond ethnic identity as the basis for political participation, the new party committed to pursue Abiy's *medemer* political ideology, which emphasized a kind of synergy and unity paired with more market-oriented economic policies. The TPLF refused to support the merger, labeled it "illegal and reactionary," and argued that the move placed in doubt the federalism that had been at the core of the Ethiopian state since 1991 (Allo, 2019). Other political leaders who emphasized federalism also condemned the move. Lemma Megersa, the Minister of Defense and past head of the OPDO, told an interviewer that he also was against the merger and Abiy's *medemer* ideology.

As argued above, the EPRDF managed to remain in power by managing the contradictions between centralized power and autonomous ethno-federal regions. Abiy and his supporters sought to overcome this contradiction and build a new, more equitable unity. It is unclear whether the PP will manage to take over the institutional capacities of the EPRDF. It is possible that, as the new de facto incumbent, the PP will be able to use the old party's financial resources and cadres to mobilize in the countryside in anticipation of elections in 2020.

But the ethnic mobilizations and conflicts of 2016–2019 greatly increased the political salience of identity politics, raising questions regarding the viability of a new pan-Ethiopian party. There is clearly a constituency that supports non-ethnic politics and responds to narratives that highlight ethnic harmony and Ethiopian unity. Supporters are particularly prevalent in Addis Ababa and other urban areas. At the same time, however, the ethno-federal institutional arrangements in place since 1991 have reinforced political attachment to specific ethnic communities and have fostered strong commitments to self-administration, including the right to be educated and conduct official business in their local languages. The shift from nearly 30 years of politics shaped by ethnically defined institutions, including ethnically defined regional states, to a non-ethnic ruling party such as the PP is fraught with uncertainties.

The PP's competitors threaten the incumbent party's hold on power but forming an alternative nation-wide ruling coalition will be difficult. Some non-EPRDF parties returned from exile recently and have untested abilities to do the work of registering supporters, identifying candidates, and getting out the vote for elections. New political organizations that advance polarizing ethnic narratives of grievance, such as NAMA and the Oromo youth in the Qeerroo, clearly have significant support but the strength of this support is untested in elections. Some of the energy behind the move to build new regional states in the south is the sharp divisions between different groups, with the Sidama–Wolayita case emblematic. Mobilization by the Qeerroo and the OLF is often framed around opposition to "northerners" and NAMA's rhetoric recalls the very glories that many Oromo regard as times of imperial repression. It is hard to imagine a counter-PP coalition that would include OLF/Qeerroo, NAMA, and the TPLF since their most popular messages identify the other as a threat.

All of this leaves post-EPRDF politics in considerable turmoil and turbulence. It is not clear that the PP can become the kind of post-communist party that emerged following transitions in parts of the former Soviet Union. Local power centers that long aligned themselves with the EPRDF in

order to retain their positions will face more options and far more uncertainty. The message of unity will resonate among key constituencies in urban areas and perhaps in parts of the Amhara regional state but Ethiopia remains overwhelmingly rural. As Allo argued, "one of the most immediate challenges to PP is that it will be difficult to win a free and competitive election as a pan-Ethiopian party while ethnicity remains the predominant political cleavage" (Allo, 2019).

Conclusion

As argued above, the EPRDF governed for nearly 30 years by operating within the contradictory logics of centralization and regional autonomy. The TPLF, building on the legacies of the protracted armed struggle, created a diverse coalition as it transitioned from a rebel movement to ruling party. For many years, the TPLF dominated the coalition but, over time, other parties built their own linkages with their respective constituencies and developed more senior leadership that could challenge the dominant leadership. The protests of 2016 represented the gravest threat to the regime since it came to power but the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy seemed to promise opening of political space and liberalization. By 2020, however, the incumbent party seemed to be under extreme stress. Ethiopia is in the midst of a period of mobilization around identity and grievances, creating political space and incentives for political parties based on specific ethnic identities. The PP seems to be a bet that the unity logic will be more popular and better able to deliver security and jobs than any alternative. If much of the old EPRDF political and financial infrastructure transfers to the new PP, it is likely to do well in the 2020 elections, even if it cannot dominate as the EPRDF did in the past.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This analysis was written before the impacts of the global corona virus pandemic, state of emergency, and postponement of elections in March 2020.
2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oyZ_LSWmt8 for an account from 2015 that highlights the ANDM's prior existence in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party.
3. This section draws on Lyons (2019).
4. I thank the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) for sharing the data behind this map.
5. Reports in early 2020 of harassment of the ONLF, now transformed into an opposition political party, and reports of divisions within the regional security officials, raise concerns about this pattern sustaining.

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